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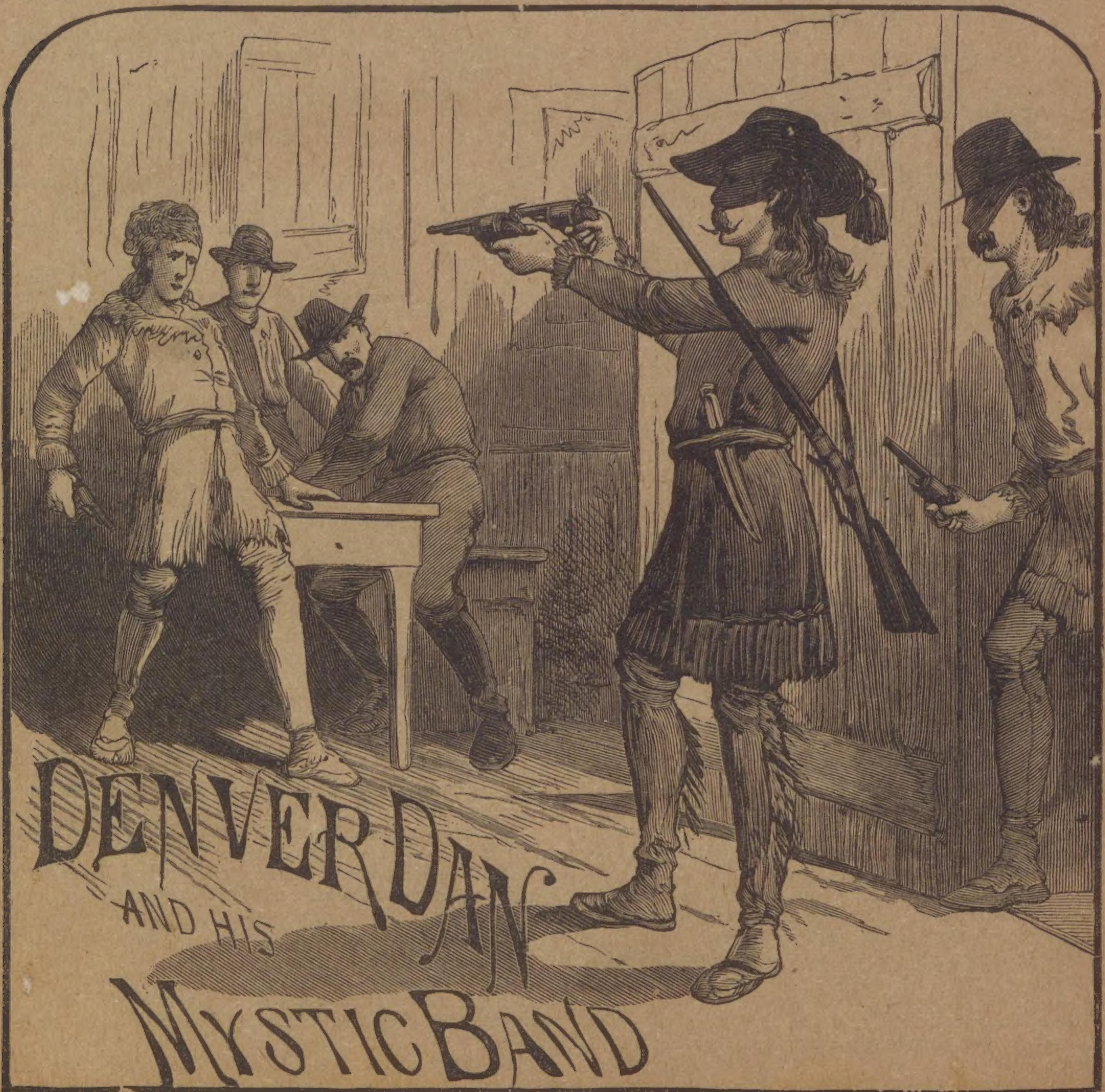
No. 1204. {COMPLETE}

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOOR ST., N. Y.
NEW YORK, July 20, 1894.

{ PRICE
5 CENTS. }

Vol. II.

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DENVER DAN,

AND HIS MYSTIC BAND.

A TALE OF THE FAR WEST.

By C. LITTLE.

CHAPTER I.

A CRY FOR HELP AND ITS ANSWER.

JUST on the edge of a range of mountains, one of the connecting spurs of the great Rocky Mountain line, stood, at the time of our story, a little cabin, occupied by a miner and his family.

Ned Travis was a man of about forty-five years old, and had emigrated from the east, bringing his wife and two children with him, and had already got together a snug little fortune.

His two children were Mary, a girl of about nineteen, and as beautiful as a fairy, and Jack, a lad of about seventeen, a fine, handsome boy, with a heart of steel, an eye like an eagle's, an arm that could fell an ox, and a nature as frank and open as a child's.

Jack and his father worked at mining or trapping as occasion offered, and Mary and her mother remained at home and looked after the house.

Mary had been taught to shoot with revolver and rifle, and was almost as good a shot as Jack himself; but with all these manly acquirements she was as gentle and modest in her deportment as the most cultured belle of the city.

Mrs. Travis was a good, motherly woman, who brought up her children to be strong, honest, healthy, useful members of society, whether that society was in a mining camp or a busy manufacturing town, and she had never known an idle moment, though her disposition was so cheerful that she did not look like an overworked drudge, but like a merry body, to whom work was a pleasure and idleness a trial.

It was customary for Ned Travis and his son to be off three or four days at a time occasionally, and during such periods Mary and her mother felt no alarm, as visitors were rarely seen, and no one had ever molested them.

"Put us up a plenty to eat, mother, for I don't expect to be back till the day after to-morrow," said Ned to his wife one morning. "Jack and I are going off prospecting, and won't be back very soon. I hope to strike it rich, and if I do, will have an addition to the house, run up another story, and fix up the porch."

The men departed, and Mary and her mother set themselves to work, and in doing the many necessary things that fell to their lot, the time passed quickly.

It was afternoon, and Mary was sitting sewing, softly humming to herself, while her mother was taking a batch of crisp, brown loaves from the oven.

Suddenly a shadow fell across the threshold, and Mary, glancing up, saw a rough-looking man standing in the doorway.

He was a stranger to her, and the sight of him standing there filled the girl with a strange dread, though she was by no means timid.

"Mornin'," he said, gruffly. "This where Ned Travis hangs out?"

"This is his home," said Mary, "but he is away at present."

She at once blamed herself for having uttered these words, for a smile of deep satisfaction passed over the man's forbidding countenance, making it look even more repulsive.

"I fancied he wasn't about," said the man, "'cause me an' Ted Ranos watched him an' the boy go off this mornin', an' we thought that now was as good a time as any to call."

"What do you want?" asked the girl, rising in alarm.

"Something to eat an' drink, an' all the money what's in the house. Maybe you've heard tell o' me. My name's Colorado Charley, and when I get mad, look out."

The mention of the man's name sent a shiver through the girl's entire frame. She knew it as the appellation of one of the most noted desperadoes of the section, and had often heard her father and brother tell of the cruel deeds done by the man.

"Come in and sit down, while I go and call mother, and get you something to eat," she answered, as calmly as she could, determining to obtain her revolver, which was in the cupboard, and show this marauder that she was not as defenseless as he imagined.

As if divining her intentions, the desperado put his hand to his boot, and said, quietly:

"No you don't. I know what you're up to. I'll get what I want myself. Just you sit down where you was and don't stir!"

At this moment Mrs. Travis rushed in from the kitchen, all excitement.

"Get the gun, quick, Mary," she said. "There's a rough man out there, and he means mischief."

Then the poor woman saw the man that had frightened Mary, and her breath was nearly taken away by the sight.

"Sit still an' don't make a noise," said Colorado Charley, "or I'll have to do some shootin'. Hey, boys, come in here and help yourselves!"

Three or four villainous-looking men rushed in at this moment, and began ransacking the chests and table drawers.

Mary grew indignant at this, and made a bound for the

little cupboard where her revolver was concealed, resolved to punish these bold intruders.

Charley, taken by surprise, made a dive at her and seized her by the hair just as she reached the cupboard and threw it open.

"Help—help!" she screamed, reaching for the weapon which was almost within her grasp.

The villain dragged her away and clapped his hand over her mouth, to stifle her cries, but not before she had uttered another piercing shriek.

Mrs. Travis had seized a broomstick, and had belabored two of the men most roundly, before the other two had been able to overpower her.

Mary's last cry for help had hardly died away, before the clatter of horse's hoofs was heard outside, and in another moment the rider dashed up and dismounted.

He was tall and finely formed, wearing a suit of soft buckskin beautifully embroidered, a broad slouched hat on his head, a shining rifle slung over his shoulder, and a belt stuck full of Bowie knives and revolvers.

A silken cord was around his neck, and on one end of this, hidden beneath his hunting-shirt, was a small silver whistle.

The man's face was partially concealed by a half mask of black silk, but such of his features as were revealed indicated that he must be exceedingly handsome.

"Who calls for help?" he cried, in a loud tone, drawing a revolver from his belt, and advancing toward the door.

CHAPTER II.

DENVER DAN, THE KING OF THE VIGILANTES—A MYSTERY AND A FORGOTTEN MEMORY.

At this sudden interruption to their depredations, Colorado Charley and his confederates paused in their work and gazed at the rash intruder with looks of astonishment.

"Release that young girl!" commanded the man.

"I won't do it," growled Charley.

"I'll give you just three seconds to let that girl go, and if you don't do it, then take the consequences."

The man made a rapid movement, and quicker than lightning had a second revolver bearing upon the outlaws, while in his lips was the little silver whistle.

"Cut him down, boys, it's that blasted vigilante," shouted Charley, and leaving their prey the ruffians made a dash toward the bold individual, who, alone and unaided, had dared to confront them.

The latter was afraid to fire for fear of injuring Mary or her mother, but upon the instant a shrill and most ear-piercing whistle was heard, which echoed and re-echoed through the hills with startling distinctness.

It was immediately answered, and half a dozen horsemen dashed up and dismounted.

"Upon them, my boys, cut down the cowardly outlaws," was the ringing cry that met their ears.

"Denver Dan, as I'm a sinner," exclaimed Charley, beating a hasty retreat to the back door, while the bullets whistled around him.

The other men attempted to escape, and three of them did so, but the fourth was captured.

"Away with him!" cried the masked horseman, "and let his fate be a warning to others."

"Oh, sir, you have saved us from a great danger, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart," said Mary, approaching and taking the stranger's hand. "Who are you?"

"I am called Denver Dan."

"The avenger of Colorado, as you are also named?"

"Yes."

"Will you not let me see your face?"

"I cannot. No one has ever yet seen the face of Denver Dan, but those who join his mystic band."

"Your arrival was most opportune, and again I thank you," said the young girl. "Will you not partake of some refreshment?"

"No; I must be off. Fear not that any harm will come to you before your father's return. The house will be guarded, though you know it not. Farewell, I must be gone."

His men had already departed with the captured outlaw, and their leader, springing upon his horse, was about to dash away when Mary called to him.

"What have you done with the man your men carried away?"

"They have hung him by this time."

"No—no, they must not; prevent it, if you are able. I will have no one hanged on my account."

"You ask for his life to be spared?"

"Yes—yes. Banish him, if you will, but do not take his life."

"I fear it is too late, but I will see," replied the man, blowing a shrill blast upon his whistle.

In a moment two of his followers appeared.

"What have you done to the outlaw?" he asked.

"Hanged him to the nearest tree."

"Is he yet dead?"

"Past recovery. His neck was broken at the first drop."

"Enough! Away, and await my coming at the glen!"

The men dashed down the path, and the mysterious rider turned to the young lady who had begged that the man's life be spared.

She had fainted, and now lay on the floor of the little cabin, her mother bending over her and trying to restore her to consciousness.

"Take care of her for a moment, while I run to the well for water," said the good woman, and the man dismounted, and, drawing a flask from his pocket, raised the inanimate form of the young girl in his arms and loosened her collar, which was fastened by a gold clasp.

As he did so, he saw that a gold chain was about the girl's neck, and on it, though concealed, was some trinket, probably a locket.

He drew this from its place of concealment, and started as if shot.

A locket of blue enamel and gold, shaped like a star, met his gaze. Touching a spring upon one of the points, the lid flew open and disclosed two portraits; one of the young lady herself, and the other of a very handsome young man, having lovely blue eyes and a tawny mustache.

"Thank Heaven, she is still true to me," murmured the man of mystery, closing and replacing the locket whence he had drawn it, and forcing a few drops of the liquid contained in the curiously-shaped flask he held in his hand down the throat of his still unconscious burden, he had the happiness of seeing the color return to her cheeks, and her bosom heave once more with life.

Mrs. Travis re-entered at this moment, and giving the young lady into her charge, the rider hastily withdrew, sprang upon his horse, and was far away out of sight by the time Mary had fully revived.

"Thank Heaven, what an escape!" said she. "Did you see him, mother?"

"See whom, my child?"

"Our preserver"

"Yes, surely; though I had no time to notice him very closely."

"You did not know him?"

"No; though I have heard it said that he was a desperate man to meet. Your father has often mentioned him."

"I wish he had shown me his face, for I am almost sure that I know him."

"Know Denver Dan? Impossible, child, nobody knows him, though many have tried."

CHAPTER III.

THE MEETING OF THE VIGILANCE COMMITTEE.

AT the time of our story Denver was not the thriving city it is at the present, though doubtless it was as fully populated.

Created by the onward march of civilization, it was indeed a mushroom city, and many desperate characters had been drawn thither by adventure, a love of gain, and that most potent attraction of many—the desire to grow rich at the expense of others.

Of course, in such a mixed population there were many thieves, gamblers, road-agents and outlaws of every description, and so bold had this latter class become that the better class of the people, those who had the morals of the community at heart, had formed themselves into a committee of vigilance for the purpose of summarily punishing the vicious and teaching them that crime was detested as much in the wilderness as in the more densely settled regions of the east.

With this brief prelude we will proceed with the narrative of the adventures of our hero.

In a cavern of the mountains, the entrance to which was through a wild glen known as Sam's pocket, the place having first been discovered by a miner named Sam Horton, who, though an American, had lived many years in Australia, were assembled a dozen men, whose faces, as viewed by the light of four or five flaming torches, bore evidence to the determined character of their possessors.

Seated at a rude table, raised upon a natural platform of rock, was the man who had so opportunely appeared when Mary Travis' cry for help rang out upon the air.

"Are we all present?" asked this man.

"All that are expected," said one.

"Then let us proceed to business. This Colorado Charley, whom we interrupted in his nefarious work this afternoon, has become altogether too reckless of the rights of others. He must be gotten out of the way."

"Would it not be well to warn him that he must leave the country?" asked one of the more mildly disposed of the band.

"Warned?" echoed Dan, knitting his brows under his mask. "He has already been warned, and has spat upon our warning. Did not you, Sam Horton, place a notice to quit upon the door of his cabin?" continued the leader, turning to one of the band, he who had discovered the Pocket.

"I did, captain."

"And how did he treat it?"

"He tore the notice down, spat on it and trod it under foot, saying, with an oath, that he should stay around these yer diggings just as long as he saw fit."

"And you, Mike Holcraft, what attention did he pay to the notice you posted?" contined Dan.

"Drove his Bowie knife through it, and scrawled underneath it these words:

"I'll stick this same knife into the heart of any cussed vigilante what tries any nonsense onto me."

"Yours cussedly,

"COLORADO CHARLEY."

"You hear? What shall be the punishment of such a wretch?"

"String him up to the nearest tree as a warning to all others of his class!" shouted the others.

"Enough! I command all of you, and every man that calls me leader, to hang the man on sight. The majesty of the law must be maintained."

"It must!" echoed the men, in a breath.

"Who are the chief members of his gang?"

"Tom Sutton—or Shooting Tom, as he calls himself—Joe Monte, or Mexican Joe, and Phil Dorn."

"Phil Dorn!" exclaimed Dan. "Is he out here in this country? I know him well, the rascal. It is to him that

I owe the saddest blow that ever fell upon me. Let him beware, for I make him my especial victim."

"There are more of them, captain," said Horton. "The gang is a big one, and comprises road agents, claim jumpers, gamblers, and horse-thieves."

"As fast as you find one of them doing any mischief, put him out of the way, and we'll soon clean out the gang, or make 'em emigrate."

"That we will!" cried they all.

At this moment a man rushed into the cavern, in great excitement.

"Colorado Charley and two of his gang are on their way to rob old Pete Dunn of all he's saved up!" cried the man. "They are making for his house now."

"Away with you, my men!" cried Dan; "and don't forget to shoot the villain on sight, unless you get a chance to hang him. I will be with you later on."

The men departed, and Dan busied himself for some time, making entries in a large book before him, which he then hid away in a secret hole at one side of the cavern.

Then he dashed the one remaining torch left by the men upon the floor, and put it out by a stamp of his foot.

Making his way swiftly out of the cavern, he emerged into the ravine, faintly illuminated by the straggling rays of the moon, and, ascending to the level of the country above, stood for a moment, engaged in thought.

Suddenly a boy came running toward him from a clump of bushes, and said, in a whisper:

"Be you Denver Dan?"

"What do you want of Denver Dan, my lad?"

"If you be Denver Dan, you're wanted down to Travis'. Colorado Charley has gone there with his men, an' is going to carry the young woman away with him."

With a muttered imprecation on the head of the outlaw, Dan darted forward, and in another instant he was seized by half-a-dozen men, overpowered, and dragged away before he could summon his men to aid him.

CHAPTER IV.

A SEARCH FOR GOLD INTERRUPTED—DENVER DAN TO THE RESCUE.

DOWN in a deep ravine, where a little stream trickled along among the boulders, reflecting the cloudless sky above it, two men were hard at work with pick and shovel.

These were Ned Travis and his son Jack, who had discovered signs of gold where no one had ever supposed the precious metal to be hid.

"I think we'll strike something rich pretty soon, father," said Jack, pausing for breath and wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I hope so, Jack. If we do, how would you like to go East and finish your education—go to college?"

"Ah, father, the only college I care about is the mountains. I will learn more of real manhood here than in all the colleges of the land. Why, I can outrun, outwalk, outshoot any of your college chaps now, and as for Latin and Greek, what do I care for them? The honest, live language of a hard-working, God-fearing man is all the tongue I care to speak."

"You won't always want to live out here, Jack. You will want to go into the city some day."

"Not as long as you and mother and Mary are here, dad. What's good enough for you will suit me, I fancy."

"But Mary will want to go back. She has not forgotten her old lover in the east."

"I wish I knew whether he was worthy of her, dad. There was a dark cloud upon his name which was never cleared away."

"Yes—they said he robbed the bank where he was employed."

"And the last I heard about him was that he had dis-

appeared, his fair fame still cloaked and the money yet in his possession."

"Who told you that, Jack? I had it different. They said that he had beggared himself to make good the bank's loss, and that he had gone to the Far West to rebuild his fortunes."

"I had it from Phil Dorn, Mary's sweetheart."

"Phil Dorn? I don't like the man, Jack. I fancy he is not as honest as he might be. Surely, Mary does not give him any encouragement, does she? I should be sorry if she did, for they tell me in Denver that he is a gambler and a ruffian. His hands are too white for a dweller in these parts."

"I don't think Mary does fancy him altogether, dad, though he dresses well and has quite an air."

"I was sorry he ever followed us out here, Jack. Little as I knew him in the east I did not like him."

"Well, here goes for another whack, just for luck!" said Jack, raising his pick.

He drove it into a mass of earth between two rocks, where it struck something which gave out a metallic sound and remained wedged in.

With considerable difficulty Jack pulled it out, loosening the earth all around it and sending the dirt and pebbles rattling down into the little stream.

In the midst of the dirt thus turned up was something that shone and glittered in the sunlight.

"By George, father! clear away the earth!" cried Jack, excitedly. "I'll bet I've hit it at last!"

Ned Travis cleared away the loose earth with his shovel, and the glittering spot grew larger.

"'Tis a nugget, dad, a real nugget!" exclaimed Jack. "Let me give him another clip."

He was about to strike another blow with his pick when a startling event occurred.

Crack!

Snap!

Two pistol shots rang out upon the still air, startling the echoes all around.

"My God!" cried Ned Travis, putting his hand to his side. "I am shot!"

Then he uttered a low cry and sank in an inanimate mass at his son's feet, while his shovel fell from his grasp, and rolled down into the water.

Dropping his pick, Jack knelt by his father's side just as a bullet whistled over his own head.

Drawing his own revolver he fired toward the spot where a thin wreath of blue smoke was seen.

There was a cry of pain, and then two or three more pistol shots were heard, the boy returning them in quick succession.

Then the forms of three or four men appeared from the bushes at the top of the ravine.

With a quick blow of his pick the lad loosened the nugget and sent it rolling down the rocks, where it at last fell into the water with a splash.

Catching the limp form of his father in his strong arms, Jack dodged behind a projecting rock as a shower of bullets whistled around him, one or two piercing his hat.

A few steps ahead of him, there was a shelving rock, over which the water poured in a thin sheet looking like a veil.

Toward this spot the boy ran, and when he reached the sheet of water, dove straight through it.

One would have naturally supposed this to be a fool-hardy thing to do, but the boy knew better.

Behind the thin veil of water was a natural cavern, quite large enough to hold several persons, and entirely shielded from the outside gaze.

Once beyond the sheet of water, the lad was as securely screened from sight as if a wall had intervened between him and his pursuers.

Laying his father down upon a flat rock, Jack bathed

his forehead, and loosened his shirt for the purpose of discovering the nature and extent of his wound.

Meanwhile the men who had fired upon the lad, rushed down into the ravine, expecting to finish their work.

To their great surprise nothing was to be seen of him.

"Never mind, Charley, we'll go for the nugget anyhow," said one of the men; "I saw it roll down into the water."

"All right Tom, we'll go for it," said the man addressed, who was none other than Colorado Charley, the desperado.

"And I'll see if I can find the lad," said a third. "It wouldn't do for me to be caught firing on him. It would ruin my prospects with his sister. If he suspects me, I'll kill him; if not, I'll say I drove you fellows away. You tumble?"

"You bet, Phil," said the other, who was Shooting Tom himself, the fourth man just appearing being Mexican Joe.

While Phil Dorn started in pursuit of Jack, the others hurried down to the bottom of the ravine in search of the nugget.

Tom found it, and was lifting it from the water when the sharp crack of a pistol broke the stillness, and he fell forward with a bullet in his brain, while the nugget rolled once more into the water.

Looking up, Colorado Charley uttered a cry of rage.

"Denver Dan, by all that's bad!" he cried, and plunged into the bushes as a bullet struck him in the shoulder.

CHAPTER V.

AWAITING THE DEATH PENALTY.

How did it happen that Denver Dan, whom we left in the hands of his foes, had appeared on the track of the outlaws, and sent another of their number to his last account?

Let us go back a little, and trace his adventures up to this point.

When he was seized so suddenly, his captors hurried him away quickly, giving him neither time to call out or whistle for his comrades, his hands being pinioned behind his back, and a thick gag thrust into his mouth.

His eyes were blindfolded, and being lifted from his feet he had no idea of where he was being carried.

It was some time before he was set down again, and then he found himself in a rough log cabin plastered with mud so scantily that the wind whistled in through the cracks and struck a chill to his very bones.

A blazing pine-knot stuck in a chink of the rough walls, afforded all the light there was, and by it he could see from six to a dozen men, among them his old enemy, Colorado Charley.

He was placed upon a bench built into the cabin, and securely tied down to it by stout cords, his arms fastened to his body, and his feet lashed firmly together.

"There you'll stay, Mr. Denver Dan, until the morning," said Charley, "an' then do ye know what we're a gwine to do with yer?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"Yes, we be," said another of the gang—Mexican Joe, already alluded to. "We're goin' to hang ye, d'ye hear—hang ye, ye white-handed pup; ugh, I hate ye, as I do all honest men!"

"The rope has not been twisted that will hang Denver Dan. I know you, Joe Monte, and you, too, Ted Ranos. You were at the Travis house this afternoon and escaped; but look out for yourself, I've got a rope around your neck, and I'll tighten on it before many days."

"Never mind him," blurted out Charley, "he ain't wuth wastin' words on. We're gwine fur ter string ye up outside of yer in the mornin' when the sun's a risin', an' the boasted name o' Denver Dan'll be the laughin' stock o'

all the boys fur miles 'round. Say what prayers ye knows ter-night, fur the sun rises 'arly in these yer parts. Scatter now, boys, an' one on ye hang outside the shanty an' keep watch."

The men departed, and Charley stretched himself out on the ground, his back against the wall, and indulged in a smoke.

"I've got every one of you fellows down fine," said Dan, whose mask had not been removed, strange to say, "and down you go into our book. There's you, Mr. Charley, and Joe, and Ted, and Shooting Tom, and Roaring Ben Jones, Jack Scallon, Jimmie Denton, Bob Bryer and Tim Sanderson. There's that many that I'm sure of. You've got a big gang, Charley, but I'm picking them out one at a time, and as fast as we catch one of them in anything crooked, away he goes up Salt River. Bear that in mind."

"Do you expect that yer gwine ter git out o' this scrape, Mr. Denver Dan?"

"Most certainly I do, Mr. Colorado Charley."

"Look yer, Dick, you allers goes masked, an' ye see I've respected your disguise, an' none of these 'ere cusses knows yer. I do, though, but I ben't gwine ter give ye away unless ye gits too sassy. Ye'll swing with your mask on, an' ye'll be buried with it on, an' nobody but me 'll know who ye are, 'cause I don't want ter disgrace ye so much. Ye wouldn't like fur me to tell who ye are, would ye?"

Dan was silent.

"Why, even yer own picked men—yer blasted old Vigilants—wud go back on ye if they knowed what sort of a man they hed fur a chief—a reg'lar thief, a miserable cuss, wot robbed a—"

"Take care!" muttered Dan, between his firmly-closed teeth; "don't you dare whisper that word. You know well enough, if you know anything of what you claim to have knowledge, that I am innocent of those charges. You know who the real culprit is. He is one of your gang, and has told you those things."

"P'rhaps he has."

"I know him, and my men are on his track. Tell him for me, Charley, tell him that I, too, am upon his path, and as surely as there is a sky above our heads"—the words were spoken slowly, but with such a terrible earnestness, that made even the outlaw himself shudder—"as surely as I sit here and you lie there, I will kill him upon sight!"

"H'm! Yer company ben't as cheerful's I'd like, Mr. Dan, an' I guess I'll go outside. Ye kin go ter sleep if ye chooses; I'll be sure to wake ye in the mornin'."

"And look you, too, Charley, before you go," added Dan, as the man arose to his feet, "the very moment I am free, take precious good care of your neck, for I mean to hang you, or my name's not Denver Dan."

"Thankee, ye're quite obleegin' fur to mention it. Nothin' like knowin' what to expect, ye know. Don't worry yerself about me, though, for I wouldn't have ye die wi' anything on yer mind for a nugget as big as yer own heart."

Then, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and extinguishing the pine-knot, which had nearly burned out as it was, the man departed, leaving Dan in darkness and alone.

"So they intend to hang me in the morning at sunrise, do they?" mused the strange man when left alone. "Not if I know myself. The day is not yet put down in the calendar that will witness the hanging of Denver Dan!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNSUCCESSFUL HANGING.

THE early morning light was just creeping into the woods, when an interesting scene might have been witnessed.

At one side was a tumble-down shanty built of logs; and

near it was an open space occupied by a group of men talking earnestly together.

Not far away a great buttonwood tree stretched its branches over the group, and upon the lowest limb was hung a rope, noosed at one end, which now dangled idly in the wind.

Standing against the tree, tied to it, in fact, was a man dressed in tanned buckskin, wearing a slouched hat on his head, and a half mask of black silk upon his face.

As will be readily surmised, this man was Denver Dan, and the men standing together were his executioners.

A pile of logs, about three feet in height, was placed under the deadly noose, and upon this it was expected that the doomed man would stand previous to his being suddenly ushered into the next world.

"Time's up," said Charley, suddenly. "Roaring Ben, fetch the victim hyar; Bob Bryer, you go help him."

The two men thus addressed, went to the tree where Dan was secured, untied the cords that bound him to it, and marched him to the pile of logs.

"You, Jack Scallon, help them boys ter lift him onto that yar wood-pile. Ted Ranos, jump up thar an' fix the noose, draw it pretty snug, too, d'ye mind, so's thar won't be no condemned slippin'."

These orders were successfully obeyed in perfect silence, and without the least confusion.

All preparations being completed thus far, Charley surveyed the intended victim of the outlaws' spite, with a glance of satisfaction.

The place was quiet and retired, there seemed not the remotest chance of interruption, and in a few moments, if all went well, the lifeless body of Denver Dan would be swinging to and fro in the morning breeze.

If all went well; ay, that was a most important consideration.

"Now you, Theodore Ranos, called Ted, fur briefness, lay hold o' that yer rope's end, an' when I hollers, ye'll give it a yank an' make fast 'round that stump; savvy?"

"You bet."

"Ben and Jack, when Ted pulls that thar rope, you jist scatter them logs to ther fourteen winds o' Heaven, understand."

"Make yer mind easy on that p'int, pard."

"Now stan' to yer stations, an' when I give the word, act." The men obeyed without comment.

"Denver Dan, old man," said Charley, turning to our hero, "have ye got anything to say against yer bein' strung up?"

"Nothing that can make you desist, I suppose," answered he, coolly.

"Are ye got any last request fur to make?"

"I would like to die with my hands free; I can't bear the idea of going off tied up like a pig. Unfasten my hands and feet. I will make no resistance, I promise you."

"Well, that's a queer thing fur to ask. I hed ye tied so's yer death struggles wouldn't be so painful to our nerves. Ye'll kick like a mule when that ar rope tightens on your wizzen."

"I shall make no struggles, I promise you. When I die I shall die easy, but I don't want to go off trussed up like a goose."

"What d'yer say, pard? Shall we ontie the critter's hands?"

"Yes; we'll hev more fun," answered one.

"Thar ben't no danger o' his gittin' away wi' that yer twine roun' his neck."

"He'll give us the very nooest style o' fling, and I want ter learn ther steps."

"Let's have the double-shuffle. It'll be as good as a cir-kiss."

"It ain't much he kin ask fur, so's we mought as well let him have his own way in this yer biz."

These and other would-be facetious remarks were made by the brutes standing around, and Charley cut the cords that bound Dan's hands and feet himself.

"Now, haul away!" he cried.

Before the rope could tighten Dan's right hand flew to his bosom, tore aside the shirt, and in an instant the silver whistle was in his mouth.

A most ear-piercing blast followed, instantly succeeded by another and another.

"Great Jerusalem!" shouted Charley. "I forgot that yer whistle. Pull, my lad, pull; kick away them thar logs lively, now, lively."

An answering whistle was heard, and as Dan's body arose in the air the tramp of horses' hoofs sounded through the forest.

"A rescue, by gosh!" roared Charley. "They'll come too late, by mighty, fur this'll finish the biz fur the whelp!"

He whipped out his revolver and took quick aim at Dan's head, intending to make sure of his victim.

Before he could pull the trigger a succession of rifle shots broke upon the ear, and the pistol fell from his grasp, being knocked out of his hand by a bullet.

Ted Rano was struck on the head by another of the fatal missiles, and he fell to the ground dead, the rope slipping from his grasp.

Roaring Ben and Jack Scallon were also hit, the one in the left lung and the other in the back of the neck, both falling in the agonies of death and expiring in a few minutes.

Dan fell to the ground stunned, and then, with a wild shout, a party of horsemen rode up at full speed, firing right and left.

Colorado Charley, Mexican Joe, Tom Sutton, Bryer and Sanderson escaped, but Jimmie Denton was wounded so badly in the leg that he could not get away, and was speedily captured.

Jack Horton caught Dan in his arms, tore away the noose which had nearly been so fatal, and poured several drops of brandy down his leader's throat.

Dan slowly revived and opened his eyes, gazing wildly around him for a few moments.

"Ah, my men, you got here in time, did you? Thank Heaven for that!"

"We were prowling through the woods, looking for these rascals," said Mike Holcraft, "when we heard your whistle three times, and knew that something particular was up, for three blasts means most desperate and important business."

"Indeed it was," said Dan.

"We suspected that something was wrong," continued Horton, "for that scare last night was all bosh. There was no intention of robbing the old man, and I believe that was only a blind."

"Who brought the information?" asked Dan.

"Dan Robbins."

"Where is he now?"

"Don't know; we haven't seen him since last night."

"Could he have meant to mislead us? Search him out at once, and if he cannot satisfactorily explain this matter, bring him to me."

"All right, captain," answered Horton, who knew that Dan Robbins' death-warrant was signed unless he could explain away the damaging testimony against him.

"We can have no traitors in our band," said Dan, sternly; "for unless we have perfect union and harmony we can never hope to rid the country of the vermin that infest it."

"Indeed we cannot."

"Here are three more of the villains out of our way," resumed Dan, glancing about him, "and there will soon be a fourth. Hang that rascal up with the same rope that was intended for me. It will be an undeserved honor, but it's the last he'll get."

While the order was being obeyed, Dan strolled into the

hut and took possession of his weapons which had been left there, and then lighting a torch, set fire to the hut in many places.

When he had finished this task the body of the captured ruffian hung from the tree, the last spark of life extinct.

"Leave him there to rot and be eaten by turkey buzzards and coyotes," said Dan, "and let his fate be a warning to others. Have any of you seen my horse?"

"I found him this morning wandering alone," said Mike Holcraft, "and I thought it strange, so I took him along with me. He's back there a piece in the woods."

Dan gave utterance to a peculiar call, and with a glad neigh a splendid-looking steed came bounding toward him.

Springing astride his back the leader of this band of Vigilantes set himself firmly in his saddle and gave the word to proceed.

"Now to follow up these ruffians," he said, "until the last one has paid the penalty of his crimes with his life!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE REWARD OF TREACHERY.

Two men were seated about a little fire on the banks of the South Fork of the Platte river, a few miles from the city of Denver, eagerly conversing.

"I can't help it if the feller got away from ye," said one. "I did my part, an' I claim the reward."

"Now look yer, Dan Robbins, the thing didn't go through an' four o' our fellows got dropped, some o' the best o' 'em, too."

"That wasn't my fault; I agreed to give him inter yer hands, an I did; if you let him go arter that, I ain't to blame, Tim Sanderson."

"My boss give me half o' what he said he'd give ye, an' told me to bring it to ye; here it is, an' if ye ain't satisfied ye can leave it; that's all yer'll git, and if ye go ter kickin' ye won't git nothin'."

The speaker threw a bag containing some jingling stuff at Dan Robbins, and the latter took it and put it in his pocket, grumbling at the smallness of the amount.

"If you want ter try agin, Charley says all right, an' if ye manage ter git Denver Dan inter our fists, an' we string him up deader'n a herrin', then ye'll git what ye was promised, besides what ye are got now."

"It's a mighty ticklish business, I tell ye, Tim Sanderson," answered the other, "an' if the gang was to suspect me I'd swing fur it. I didn't expect Colorado Charley'd go back on his word like that; but it's all ye kin expect of a bloody horse-thief!"

"Who's a horse-thief?"

"He is, an' you're another, an' I'll bet my boots you put the other half o' that yer money in yer own pocket; ye're just about sneakin' enough!"

The outlaw sprang to his feet with an oath.

"Ye dodrotted spy, d'ye dar' to call me a sneak?" he roared, drawing a revolver. "Take that back, or I'll pepper ye so's your own grandmother wouldn't know ye!"

"Durned if I do! Ye're a goldarned lyin' pup, an' ye stole that ar money, I'll be sworn!"

Sanderson fired upon the instant, but not before another pistol report broke the stillness.

With a howl of agony, he fell forward into the fire, and was literally roasted, being unable to extricate himself.

Had Dan Robbins fired the shot?

No.

He was much astonished, and looked around to see whence the bullet had come that had so luckily saved him from death.

Two men came out of the bushes at that instant and approached him.

"Dan Robbins," said one of them, "you're a traitor and deserve death."

"What's the matter?" asked the man, turning pale.

"You tried to betray our leader, Denver Dan. You sent us off on a wild-goose chase last night, so's to leave him alone. Then you got them fellers of Colorado Charley's to light on the boss and hang him."

"It's a lie! I did nothin' of the kind."

"What yer got in yer pocket? Trot it out, quick."

The man drew out the bag of money.

"Where'd ye git it?"

"Made it off'n Tim Sanderson, playin' euchre."

"Where's yer cards?"

Dan produced a very dirty, greasy deck from one of his pockets, and spread it out triumphantly before his questioners.

"Look hyar, Dan Robbins, what's one of our crowd doin', associatin' wi' a fellar what's known to be a hoss-thief an' a gambler?"

"I never knowed he was; an' if he war, so much the better, fur I've got his money."

"Now, look hyar, Dan Robbins," said Sam Horton, for he was one of the new-comers, Mike Holcraft being the other, "ye can't bluff us. We heard all you said to this cuss hyar, fur we've been follerin' on yer fur two days. I shot him 'cause he was one o' Colorado Charley's pals. I'm gwine ter shoot you 'cause ye went back on the captain."

Dan Robbins seized his revolver and fled, firing at Jack as he ran.

Both men drew a bead upon the fugitive, and fired.

He fell forward, and, rolling down the bank, tumbled into the river, the waters being dyed with his blood.

He sank at once to the bottom, one hand clutching his ill-gotten gold, and the other his useless revolver; and as he lay there, cold and stiff in death, the waters rolled over him, and washed away all traces of this deed of righteous vengeance.

The traitor had paid the penalty of his black-hearted treachery, and thereafter any of the band who should be tempted to betray their leader for ill-earned gold, would remember the fate of Dan Robbins, and take warning thereby.

As the waters carried away the last traces of the punishment received by the traitor, Sam Horton noticed the cry of a wild bird, and in a moment Denver Dan appeared, mounted on his gallant steed.

"Well, what did you learn?"

"We found them just concluding the bargain, and learned enough to satisfy us of the man's guilt. He tried fur to lie out of it, but 'twas no use. We caught him dead to rights every time, an' at last he tried to get off, pepperin' us as he went."

"He has paid the penalty?"

"He has; an' the water thar has covered up all signs o' it. The cussed money dragged him down, an' the fishes'll eat him up afore he rises."

"His fate is a just one. Let others who prefer serving evil men to their judges take warning!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK TRAVIS FINDS A TRUE FRIEND.

At the time that Jack Travis and his father were surprised by Colorado Charley and his pals, the outlaw having picked up Phil Dorn on the way, Denver Dan was not far away, having got upon the track of the villains since leaving the scene of Dan Robbins' terrible death.

He heard the shots and knew the rascals must be up to some mischief, so spurring his noble steed forward, he reached the top of the ravine in time to see Jack fleeing from his pursuers, and Tom Sutton picking up the nugget.

As already related, Tom received a shot that ended his evil career forever, and Charley got another that made him remember Denver Dan for some time.

Dan dismounted, and leaving his horse in the bushes, whistled for his two companions, who soon appeared, and the three descended to the bed of the little stream:

"So Phil Dorn and Mexican Joe are still at large," he muttered. "Tom Sutton has fired his last shot, however, and that makes one less of the gang. We'll have 'em all before long, Horton, eh?"

"You're right, captain; but what war the purtickler biz that these yer fellers was on?"

"Look around you. What do you see?"

"Signs o' gold, by the hokey!"

"Put your hands down there in the water and see what you can find."

Horton obeyed.

"By the everlastin' Rocky Mountains!" he ejaculated, "a nugget twice as big as your head," and he threw the treasure out upon the grass and gazed upon it with admiring eyes.

"By gum! what a find."

Then a startling sound was heard.

It was the click of a revolver.

This was followed by the sound of a boy's voice ringing clear and strong above the noise of the stream.

"Drop that nugget or I'll drop you! That's my property!"

It was Jack Travis who had uttered these bold words, and the man quickly turning, beheld the youth standing near, covering him with his weapon.

"Put up your revolver, boy," said Dan, pleasantly. "We have no desire to rob you of what is yours by right. Denver Dan despoils the thief, never the honest man. It was lucky for you that we were at hand, else you and your golden treasure would have parted company before this."

"Are you Denver Dan?" asked the lad.

"So I am called. You are not alone?"

"No; my father was wounded, and I took him to a place of safety."

"Lead us to it."

"You will not harm him?"

"Harm him, no, indeed. I would save his life; he may need more help than you can give him."

"You may follow me, then, but not the others."

"You need have no fear of them, they are my trustiest followers. However, have your own way. Watch the nugget, Horton, and if Phil Dorn returns, shoot him dead!"

"Phil Dorn?" echoed Jack Travis, "was he one of my enemies?"

"He was, boy, and is my deadliest foe."

"Who are you?"

"Denver Dan!"

"That is not your real name?"

"It is all I acknowledge in these parts."

"Come with me, then, Denver Dan, for I know you are my friend."

In a few moments the man and his conductor stood on the other side of the screening veil of water, Dan expressing considerable surprise at the safe retreat the place offered.

"I discovered it by accident, sir, and you can imagine that I would not want every one to know about it," explained Jack, when they were inside.

Dan turned his attention to Ned Travis, and quickly bandaged his wound, having lint and some healing ointment to hand, and pouring a few drops from his oddly-shaped flask down the man's throat, soon had the pleasure of seeing him breathe easier, and in a few moments he was in a sound sleep.

Dan motioned to the boy to follow him, and then darting through the watery veil, awaited the boy's coming.

Jack was at his side in a moment, and Dan, taking the boy's hand, led him away a few steps, and said:

"Your name is Jack Travis?"

"Yes; how did you know that?"

"You have a sister, Mary?"

"I have."

"You once lived in the east, and have been here but comparatively a short time?"

"Yes; how did you know so much?" answered the boy, opening his eyes.

"Denver Dan knows more than a good many people give him credit for. Did you ever know—"

The rest of the sentence was whispered in the lad's ear.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Then you are indeed—"

"Denver Dan, and no one else."

"And Phil Dorn lied when he said that—well, you know who I mean, was guilty, and had fled to the west to escape punishment?"

"Did Phil Dorn ever explain to you why he had come west himself?"

"Yes, it was for love of Mary."

"He lies!" hissed Dan, his face glowing with passion. "I can tell you why he came out here, and why he traduces the fair name of an innocent man. I know his secret, my boy, and will amply repay the wrong he has committed against—against my friend. Let him look to his safety, for if ever he and I meet, one of us must perish, unless the villain will retract all he has said, and clear the name of the guiltless from infamy."

"You will let me see your face?" asked Jack.

"Not yet. When your father awakes, he must be taken home; I will accompany you and see that your treasure reaches home in safety. Remember, lad, that you have a firm friend in me, and if trouble comes, don't forget to call on Denver Dan!"

CHAPTER IX.

A VALLEY OF DEATH.

THE clouds lowered darkly on the mountain, and there were all the indications of an approaching tempest; the wind blowing in fitful gusts, while ever and again the dark masses of vapor were rent asunder by the lurid flash of lightning.

At one point in the narrow pass a heavy torrent poured down the side of a rock and lost itself in the depths beneath, along the top of which ran the path.

Just overhead, the waters had gathered in a deep basin, and at one side a few paces back from where the water made its escape, could be seen a little valley nestling in a curve of the hills.

A slender sapling grew on the very brink of the basin, which had gradually widened until the mass of waters was something to be dreaded if it should ever break its confines.

At present the overflow at the point mentioned was sufficient to prevent the basin from breaking its banks at any other point, but no one could tell what chance might dam up this place and send the stream out of its course and below into the little ravine or valley, looking like nothing more than a cup hollowed out by Nature's hand in the hill-side.

In this little depression was an encampment, some half dozen or more men being seated around a little fire made of some dry wood, which emitted little or no smoke.

The men were our old acquaintances, Colorado Charley, Phil Dorn, Mexican Joe, Bob Bryer, Jimmie Denton, and one or two others, and as usual they were plotting mischief.

"They can't possibly get there before us," Phil was saying, "and we can do the business up clean. I'm bound to get ahead of Denver Dan, and I'll do it. If what you say is true, Charley, it won't do to let the girl know who he is until I get her in my power."

"If what I say is true? Ye told me so, yerself; that's all I know about it. I didn't yank his mask off."

"I'll do it if we ever catch him again. I'm sure he's the same man, and if he is, he and I can't live within a thousand miles of each other. I'll send him to Jericho and I'll go to Texas."

"Ye want to git the gal, d'ye."

"Yes, Mary Travis must be mine. You plugged the old man so that he can't travel fast, even with Denver Dan's help, and what's two women against us, I want to know."

"They're both pretty good shots, I kin tell ye," said Joe Monte, "an' I wouldn't want to git in the way o' ther bullets when they're shootin'."

"Oho! we kin surround 'em, I reckon'. It's a pity Tom Sutton got plugged; he'd 'ave helped us outen the biz fust class."

"Arter we git the gal fur Phil, we must see to gittin' Denver Dan out o' the way," remarked Bob Bryer. "If Dan Robbins can't do a neater job than that, we'll hev ter git some un else."

None of them knew that Dan Robbins, upon whom they threw the blame of Dan's escape, would never more plot against the redoubtable Denver Dan, for if they had their merriment would not have been so boisterous as they talked of how neatly they had cheated the traitor out of his money.

"Well, the storm's comin' up pretty lively," observed Charley, at length, "an' I cal'late we'd better be diggin' outen yere. Good golly, what's that?"

The clatter of a horse's hoofs on the rocky path above was what had startled the villains.

Then sounded that shrill whistle they knew so well, and looking up, they beheld, outlined against the dark sky, the terrible form of Denver Dan mounted and masked, and with a brace of revolvers in his gloved hands.

"Ha-ha! I have you nicely trapped," laughed the mysterious being. "Surrender, every man of you, or I'll shoot you down like rats."

The men sprang to their feet in an instant, and made a break for freedom.

Half a dozen shots were heard, the one following the other rapidly, and three of the outlaws fell mortally wounded, Bob Bryer among the number.

Dan quickly sprang from his horse and jumped aside as the bullets whistled around him, but a blast upon his silver whistle brought Horton, Mike Holcraft and several others of his band to his aid, and they poured a deadly volley down upon the outlaws.

Jimmie Denton and two others were killed outright, and both Charley and Phil Dorn were badly wounded. It was madness to attempt to escape up the sides of the ravine, with Denver Dan and his band posted at the top, and the outlaws took refuge behind rocks and bushes, keeping up a desultory firing in the hope of picking off the daring leader or one of his followers.

"Stop; I know how to fix them so that there'll be no getting out," said Dan, running to the little sapling at the side of the water already mentioned.

Seizing it with both hands, he worked it back and forth, and soon, with a mighty effort, bent it clear down to the ground, so that it overhung the valley.

Then releasing it, it bounded back to its old position, but a strange transformation took place.

A stone at its root had been released and rolled down the sloping sides of the ravine, and the water above, deprived of that which had kept it in place, burst through its slight barrier and poured in a perfect flood down into the valley.

The ravine became a veritable valley of death.

The waters, so long held back, rushed with a mighty roar down the bank, sweeping everything before them, uprooting rocks, bushes and trees, and making huge gullies and fissures, and changing the whole aspect of the scene.

Upon the shelf above stood Dan, and as the outlaws were driven from their retreats he fired upon them, showing them no mercy.

Joe Monte, swept along by the current, seized an overhanging branch, and drew himself up above the flood; but Dan saw him and sent a bullet crashing through his right

arm, causing him to hang suspended, by his left, which seemed unequal to bear the strain.

"Hold on—hold on! don't shoot and I'll tell you something," he cried, in despairing tones.

"Well, what is it? Be quick about it," called Dan.

"Phil Dorn and Colorado Charley are going to run off with Mary Travis. They got away before the water came down, and—"

A pistol shot prevented the rest from being heard or even uttered, and, with a shriek, Mexican Joe fell from the limb, and dropping into the stream, was carried down into the gully where he was dashed to pieces upon the sharp rocks far below.

Surely Dan had not shot the man for giving him this important piece of information.

No; the shot had been fired by some one else, and Dan never doubted for an instant that Colorado Charley or Phil Dorn had put the wretch to death.

He caught a glimpse of the two villains, just disappearing from sight on the opposite bank, and fired a parting shot at them, but without effect.

Of all that had been in the little valley the two plotters were the only ones that had escaped with their lives, and another terrible gap had been made in the gang of outlaws that called Colorado Charley their leader.

"I'll exterminate the whole band or you can call me a liar!" muttered Dan. "They're a disgrace to mankind, and the sooner they're put out of the way the better for the rest of society."

Casting a last glance into this valley of death, he turned away and joined his band, and, with the two gold seekers, made his way swiftly down the mountain.

"Faster—faster!" he cried, to Jack. "You and I both have an interest in reaching home before these villains. You to save your sister, and I to—to prove that Denver Dan is always around when he's needed!"

CHAPTER X.

JACK TRAVIS JOINS DENVER DAN'S BAND.

THE little party hurried through the mountain pass as rapidly as possible, but before long the storm burst upon them in all its fury, and they were forced to seek shelter.

Horton found a sort of hollow in the rocks, and here Dan and the others remained, sheltered from the driving rain which poured down in torrents.

Under the lee of a huge rock, and protected above by the roof of the miniature cave, they were perfectly dry, though they could see the rain rushing in streams down from the rock that sheltered them.

The storm continued for some time, and there was nothing to do but wait, as Dan considered it dangerous for Ned Travis to be out in it, wounded as he was.

For himself he would not have minded the rain a bit, but under the circumstances he thought it best to wait.

After being delayed for two or three hours they started out once more, but darkness soon overtook them, and they were obliged to encamp for the night.

Ned's stock of provisions was exhausted, and as all hands were as hungry as bears, Dan proposed to go out and look for something to eat.

"The mountains are full of game, and I may as well have some," he said, as he started off.

They soon heard the report of his rifle, and in a few minutes he returned with half the carcass of a bear slung over his shoulder.

"The wolves will get the rest, I guess, but they are welcome to it. Start up a fire, Jack, and we'll have something to eat."

The next day, as soon as the morning broke, the march was resumed, and shortly before noon the house where Ned Travis lived was but a mile or so away.

At a sudden turn in the road they came upon a couple of men who seemed surprised at their presence.

"Bad luck for you, Ned," said one.

"What is it?"

"Colorado Charley and his gang have been up to your house, and lugged away your daughter Mary."

"Oh, my God! When did you learn this?"

"Jest now. It must have been done last night, or early this mornin'!"

"Do you know where the villains went?" asked Dick.

"No, but somebody says they were seen goin' toward Denver."

"I will go after them," said Dan, "and if I have to kill every one of Charley's gang, will rescue her."

"I will go with you," cried Jack Travis.

"But your father?"

"Let the lad go if he likes," answered Ned. "I can look out for myself now. I would like to go, but I'm not strong, and I must go and look after the mother."

"Do you wish to go with me?" asked Dan, of the boy, taking him to one side.

"Yes, and to join your mystic band; I will swear to do anything to get my sister back."

"You would join my band?"

"Yes."

"Endure all kinds of hardships; suffer many trials; be exposed to danger at all times, and all for the sake of putting down crime?"

"Yes."

"If need be, shoot a man down?"

"If he attempts to shoot me, yes."

"And hang on sight any rogue caught violating our laws!"

"I would do that now."

"And be ever ready at my call to aid and defend me, or any others of the band who may summon you?"

"As I would call for help myself, yes."

"Do you swear to be faithful to the band, and to do all in your power to bring the guilty to punishment, to slay and spare not, where crime is discovered, to regard Denver Dan as your sworn leader, and obey him in everything, trusting that he will do only that which is right; and lastly, should you be false to the vows you have taken, expect a speedy and terrible death?"

"Yes, all of it. If ever I prove a traitor, and give aid to villains, I hope I may be shot dead in my tracks!"

"Enough! You are one of us."

"What, already?" said Jack, in astonishment, thinking that there would be some awful ceremony to go through with before he could be a member of Denver Dan's band.

"Yes, you are sworn to aid our cause—the cause of law and order. Give me your hand."

Jack held forth his hand, and Dan grasped it cordially.

"Jack Travis, my lad," he said, "you are now one of this band, and my own particular aid, remember that. You are under my wing, are my own private deputy, and he who harms a hair of your head must beware the vengeance of Denver Dan!"

Then he released the lad's hand, and turning about whistled softly for Sam Horton to come up.

"Get an extra horse, Horton, for the lad, a fresh one, mind. He and I are going in search of the young lady. Be ready if you should hear my signal."

"You are going to take the lad?"

"Yes; he is my right bower. He is one of us—one of the inner circle, understand?"

Horton took off his hat and bowed, saying:

"God bless you, my boy! You are under Denver Dan's special care. Do as he says, and you'll be no discredit to the band. You are one of us—indeed, one of the very innermost an' select of the whole gang—one o' the upper rank."

Jack seemed very much mystified at this, and as Horton went away to fetch his horse, Dan said:

"You have been sworn in by myself alone, Jack, and that makes you one of the guard of honor. It is not every one of our band that can say as much. It is not every one that can say he has grasped the hand of Denver Dan. Only such can be ranked among the trusted, the reliable, the inner circle!"

CHAPTER XI.

COLORADO CHARLEY'S BAND RECEIVES A SAD THINNING OUT.

PETER DUNN was an aged Irishman, who had moved to the West, and by thrift and industry had built him a neat cottage a mile or so from Denver, owned several horses, with which he conducted the business of teaming, and had laid by a considerable sum of money.

This he kept in his house, as there were no banks in that neighborhood which he cared to trust with his treasure, though he intended to send it to the east, as soon as he had an opportunity.

One night he was suddenly aroused from sleep by hearing a noise at the window, and looking up he beheld two men just stepping into his room, having climbed up by a ladder placed outside.

He jumped up on the instant, and seized his revolver, which lay beneath his pillow.

The men were too quick for him, however, and one of them seized him by the throat before he could use his weapon, though he managed to cry out and awaken his wife, who screamed with affright at being thus suddenly aroused.

One of the outlaws put his hand over her mouth, and commanded her not to utter a sound or he would strangle her.

Two more men entered by the window, and the first, who wore a black mask covering his entire face, ordered the old man to tell them where his money was or he would fare badly.

The man refused, and the ruffian drew a keen knife and threatened to slice his ears off if he did not immediately tell where the money was, or give it to them.

At that moment, one of the sons, having been awakened by his mother's scream, rushed into the room, pistol in hand, and seeing the position of affairs, fired at one of the men, who was ransacking the bureau.

The fellow gave vent to a shriek, and with an oath on his lips, fell to the floor desperately wounded.

The young man then emptied the remaining chambers of his revolver into the crowd, and then snatching the key from the door, dashed outside and closed and locked it.

Then running back to his own room, he threw open the window and whistled long and loud, making not such a sound as Denver Dan's well-known call, but one more like a bird's trilling.

The other son, a lad of about fifteen, had been aroused by the noise of the firing, and ran into his brother's room to know what the trouble was.

"Take the revolver, Pat," said young Dunn, reloading the weapon, "and go to father's room. If any of them gawks come out, jist pepper them. Be gob, I'll let them know that the Dunns are a lively family."

At that moment several whistles were heard, similar to that of the young Irishman, and then the shrill whistle of Denver Dan himself.

"Be gob, the captain is on hand," muttered he, dodging away from the window as a bullet whizzed by, a little too close for comfort. "Be jabers! he's throue blue, he is. Hurroo! Oi've me shot-gun, an' Oi'll pepper them rasheals foinely wid it!"

Just then there came a full chorus of whistles, and a party of horsemen dashed up, led by Denver Dan himself.

There was a mad scramble among the ruffians remaining

outside, to escape, but one by one they were picked off until not one was left.

Colorado Charley, whose gang it was, was in the old Irishman's room, and when he heard Dick's whistle he knew that the place was getting too hot for him, and made a dash for the door, which he broke open so suddenly that Pat, waiting outside, lost a shot at him.

The boy was thrown down and, though Charley escaped, he managed to hit the second man that appeared, and the other, finding himself in close quarters, and not knowing how many more there might be outside, crawled under the bed.

The elder son rushed into the room with a light, and assured his father that the danger was over. Then he discovered the man under the bed, and quickly dragging him forth, unceremoniously pitched him out of the window.

Denver Dan's men grabbed him as he fell, and strung him up to a tree with neatness and dispatch.

The man shot by young Dunn was found to be dying, and he begged so hard to be allowed to pass away quietly that nothing was done to him.

Before he died he confessed that nearly the whole gang had been engaged in this affair, and that, having secured the money hoarded up by old Dunn, they had intended to leave that part of the country for good and all, Denver Dan having made it untenable.

"Was Phil Dorn with you this time?" asked Dan.

"No; he's got a gal in Denver City what he's runnin' away with. He's goin' to make for Salt Lake as fast as he can travel."

"Where is he?" said Jack Travis, who had acted nobly in this, his first engagement, having picked off two of the outlaws himself.

"In a place called Brown's. It's an ugly hole; ye dassn't go thar, an' he knowed it when he laid his trail fur it."

"Come, Jack, my boy," said Dan, "we've some distance to go before we reach Denver, and there's no time to lose. We'll rescue your sister yet, see if we don't."

The once terrible gang of Colorado Charley, the outlaw, was now nearly exterminated, not half-a-dozen members being left, and Dick swore that he would kill the rest, unless they put a thousand miles between them and him, and he was not the sort of man to break his word when he once gave it.

Young Dunn was one of the outsiders of Dan's band, that is to say, he did not go off with them upon their expeditions, but gave warning either by signal or messenger, whenever he discovered any villainy on foot, and thus rendered valuable assistance to the cause of law and order.

There were a good many of these outsiders, none of whom knew each other, though they all knew Denver Dan and the members of the "Inner Circle," and acknowledged their power.

When quiet had once more been restored, the family of Peter Dunn were left alone to talk of their good fortune in having been aided so quickly and substantially, while Dan and his men rode away swiftly, Jack Travis galloping at his leader's side.

"The work goes on finely, my lad," remarked Dan, as trees and rocks flew by, "and before long, Colorado Charley and his band will be things of the past. Let me once get Phil Dorn in my clutches, and the cloud that has rested upon my good name will vanish, and you shall know and love Denver Dan in his true character. Believe me, Jack, the time is not now far distant, only be patient a little while and all will turn out right."

CHAPTER XII.

THE OUTLAW PASSES IN HIS CHIPS.

THE "Squatter's Home" gambling saloon, in the city of Denver, was in full blast and the play was fast and furious.

The room was crowded, every table having its set of players; in front of the bar stood a solid double row of im-

bibers, and six barkeepers were kept busy in passing out the fiery fluid, cash in advance, for no one was "trusted" here, for an instant.

The air was thick enough to cut, with tobacco smoke, nearly every man having a pipe or segar between his lips, and what with that, and the heat and the odors of bad whiskey, the place was absolutely stifling.

At one of the tables, a small one over in the corner, three persons sat playing poker, one of them being a handsome boy of about seventeen, while the others were men.

One was a tall, brawny fellow with a fist like a sledge-hammer, and a manner that stamped him as a ruffian of the first water.

Our readers will doubtless recognize these two persons as their old acquaintances, Jack Travis, and Colorado Charley the outlaw, the other being an individual new to these pages, and bearing the name of Texas Jim, a notorious ruffian.

A large pile of money and chips in front of Jack showed that he had not been playing a losing game, by any means, and Charley winked across the table at his pal—for such the man was—as if to say:

"We'll pluck this pigeon yet—see if we don't."

"Have another hand, youngster?" asked Charley, calling for drinks, Jack not indulging in the fiery beverage.

"Don't care if I do," answered the lad. "You want your revenge, I suppose?"

"Yes, we do, and we're goin' ter have it," said Texas Jim.

"All right, then; trot out a new pack."

"A new pack?"

"Certainly."

"Do yer mean ter say we stack ther keerds?" asked Jim, reddening.

"I don't say anything. It's the rule to call for a new pack as often as you like."

"Oh, ye're gittin' awful stylish, ain't yer, with yer New York airs? New keerds! Well, I'll be—"

"Oh, give him a new pack, ef he axes fur 'em," said Charley. "It's as fair fur me as it is fur him. Shove 'em out 'f he wants 'em."

The new pack was produced, and Jim dealt.

"How many?" he asked Charley.

"Nary one; I'll stan' on my hand," replied the bravo, who was trying a little game of bluff.

"How many, young un?" continued Jim.

"None."

"Gosh all snakes! I guess I'll let you fellers fight it out by yourselves. I'm out'n this yer game."

"I'mbettin' a hundred dollars on this yer hand," said Charley.

"I'll see you, and go a hundred better," said Jack, shoving out the chips.

"I'll see you another hundred."

"Same tune here."

"What yer got?"

"Do you call?"

"No, I'll be shot 'f I do," said Charley, winking at Jim.

"How much do you go me better?"

"Two hundred."

"Two hundred for me."

"Three hundred better'n that."

The chips began to pile up in the center of the table, and the men gathered around to watch the game, being attracted by the mention of such high figures.

"I'll go the same," said Jack, coolly, tossing down his chips.

"Ain't you goin' it a leetle high on that ar hand o' your'n, youngster?"

"Not a bit. Do you call yet?"

"No, I don't; here, Jim, lend us yer pile till I clean out this 'ere prairie chicken."

"What do you do?"

"That kivers yer three hundred, an' thar's five hundred more on top."

"I go the same ahead of you."

"Waal, as ye don't seem ter have much more, I guess I'll see ye an' call."

"You call me?"

"Yaas. What ye got? Show up."

"Four jacks and an ace!" cried Jack, throwing down his cards.

"By the hokey, the pot's mine," yelled Charley, "I got four queens and an ace!"

"No, you don't!" said Jack, "drop those chips. Where's that card that you passed to Texas Jim under the table?"

The lad suddenly reached out and grabbed a card from the man's knee and held it up.

It was a small card, the ten of clubs.

"I never seed it afore."

"You lie, you swopped it for one of those queens."

Charley had his hand to his hip pocket in an instant.

Jack was too quick for him, his revolver being already in his lap, and he "got the drop" on the outlaw in less than a second.

"Put up that pepper-box, the pot's mine," and the lad began raking it in with one hand.

Texas Jim attempted to stop him, and received a blow in the eye that blinded him, and sent him sprawling to the floor.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed.

Knives gleamed, pistol shots were fired and glasses whizzed through the air.

Jack coolly raked in his gains though many a bullet flew past his head, but his eye seemed to be fixed on every point at once, and more than one man dropped his revolver with a howl of pain, being shot through the wrist.

Suddenly, when the tumult was at its hight, Colorado Charley uttered a terrible shriek, threw up his hands and fell to the floor a corpse.

Then a shrill whistle was heard, and at the entrance of the den stood Denver Dan, masked, a revolver in each hand, and surrounded by his faithful followers, all masked like himself.

"Denver Dan!" yelled the gamblers, making a mad rush for the rear doors.

"Don't be alarmed, gentlemen! The member from Colorado has passed in his chips, and that's all we want."

These words were by no means reassuring, and the crowd scattered like sheep, gamblers, idlers, bar-keepers, dealers and all, leaving Dan, Jack, and the Vigilants the sole occupants of the room.

"Scrape up your money, Jack," said Dan. "There's no one left to cash the chips, so you can throw them into the river. You played your game well, my boy, and if you hadn't seen the mean trick that villain tried to play, you'd have won all the same, for someone else saw it."

"Did you shoot Charley?" asked the lad.

"No one knows who shot him. It might have been one of his own gang. At any rate, he's well gotten rid of, and now to rescue Mary."

CHAPTER XIII.

A WHISPER OF HOPE.

In an up stairs room of a tumble-down house in the city of Denver, sat a young girl weeping as if her heart would break.

This was Mary Travis, the villains having succeeded in carrying her off before help arrived, as already stated.

When Denver Dan reached the cottage in the mountains in company with the father and brother of the young lady, after making Jack a member of the mystic band, everything was found in confusion.

Mrs. Travis was bound and gagged, the chests broken open and rifled, and Mary carried off, the determined resistance of the two brave women counting as nothing.

against Colorado Charley and his gang, all that was left being present.

With Denver Dan far away, and his men off in pursuit of other game, the villains had the whole field to themselves, and well did they improve the opportunity.

In one corner of the room, where it had fallen and escaped the covetous eyes of the desperadoes, was a star-shaped locket of blue enamel and gold, and upon seeing this, Dan quickly picked it up, and placed it next his heart.

Mrs. Travis had not been able to identify the men, as they had all been masked, and when they spoke, disguised their voices so that she could not recognize them.

She was certain that Colorado Charley was of the party, on account of his size and one other circumstance which she well remembered.

One of the men had called the big man Charley, and the latter had struck the fellow a back-handed blow across the mouth, which knocked him down and caused the blood to flow freely, at the same time giving the man a muttered warning to be more careful, accompanying the same with an oath.

"That is enough," said Dan. "Come, Jack, my lad, we must be off to restore your sister to her parents."

As Mary sat thus disconsolate, the door opened and Phil Dorn appeared, carrying a light, for it was now quite dark.

Mary had been all day in the lonely room, and had seen no one but an old negro woman, who had brought her food.

"Ah, my daisy," said Phil, setting down the lamp and fastening the door behind him, "still in the dumps, eh? That's not right, you should cheer up now that I have come to see you."

"Phil Dorn, why have you taken me away from my friends?"

"I have not done so."

"Have you come to carry me home again?"

"Home? Oh, yes, I've come to take you home—that is, to my home."

"What do you mean?"

"I have come to bear you away as my own bonny bride, my blue-eyed Mary of the Rocky Mountains."

"You will do nothing of the sort."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I won't be your bride."

"You won't?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't love you, in the first place, and you know it, and will never consent to be your bride."

"I can force you to be," he said, incautiously.

"Take care, Phil Dorn," she cried, springing to her feet and facing him with flashing eyes. "I am not so defenseless as you think," and she drew a case knife which she had secreted after her last meal had been brought up. "I see you now in your true colors. It is you that has brought me here and no one else. Take care, Phil Dorn, or I may be tempted to kill you."

"You mistake me, charming Mary. I would save you from the villains that have—"

"Don't you dare to call me Mary again, you contemptible wretch! I hate the very sight of you. Oh! how I wish Daniel Fleming were only here."

"Daniel Fleming, indeed!" sneered the man; "a bank robber, a defaulter, a low thief, who has been obliged to flee from justice, and has no doubt long since forgotten you, even if he ever intended—"

This time there was no warning cry, but, like a tigress, the young girl, enraged beyond endurance at hearing her lover traduced, flew at the throat of the villain, and with one blow of her right arm, which the mountain air and healthful exercise had made as strong and vigorous as that of her brother, even, felled the scoundrel to the floor.

"Don't you dare say another word against him, Phil Dorn, or I'll kill you!" she said, in low but determined tones. "I feel strong enough to strangle you, and I'll do it, too, if you anger me again. Get up!"

The discomfited knave arose to his feet with a face crimson with rage.

"You little she-devil!" he hissed, "I'll have my revenge for this, never fear! You shall marry me now in spite of everything! I'll break your proud spirit, see if I don't!"

"Don't come near me!" she answered. "I detest your very presence; your very sight is sickening to me. Begone!" and with an imperious wave of the hand, that Zenobia herself might have envied, she pointed to the door, and the wretch withdrew, cowed and abashed.

She heard the sound of the key turning in the lock, and then all her strength left her, and she grew faint, sinking into her chair in a fit of hysterical weeping.

"Oh, the heartless villain!" she cried, "to think that I should have ever for a moment have allowed him to usurp the place of my own darling. Oh, Daniel—Daniel! why is your good name clouded? Why do you not come to me?"

A sudden whisper, as if through the key-hole, aroused her from her melancholy. "I am here!" said the whisper; "rely always on Dan!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ESCAPE—FACE TO FACE.

MARY TRAVIS sprang to her feet in an instant, and rushed to the door.

"Who is there?" she cried.

"Denver Dan," was the answer.

"Denver Dan, who is he? I have heard that name before; who is he?"

"Denver Dan, and no one else. Cheer up, my dear young lady," continued the voice, "and I will find a way to release you."

"But tell me, I know that voice too well, are you not—"

"Denver Dan," was the answer, "always Denver Dan. Sh! make no noise."

Then the poor girl heard a receding step and presently heard someone coming up stairs, singing an old negro melody.

"It is the woman bringing me my evening meal," she murmured, moving away from the door, and in a moment she heard someone fumbling with the key, and pretty soon the door was thrown open and the aged negress appeared, carrying a tray upon which was a tempting array of eatables.

The old woman put the tray down on the table, and then turned and locked the door.

"Did'n I heah ye a-talkin' to some 'un, missy?" she asked.

"I think not."

"Not a-talkin' to a man outside de do', jes' dis bressed minnit?"

"I don't see how you could."

"You'se shuah ob dat? I'se got drefful sharp years, missy, an' I kin most heah a body fink."

"Oh, I guess you were dreaming."

"No, I wasn't; I heerd ye a conversin' wif a fellah wot called hisse'f Debil Dan or somefin' like a dat. Ya-ya, I see 'um blush, missy, an' now I knows you did."

"Sh! you wouldn't betray me?" said Mary, in alarm, seizing the old woman's hand.

"Not if I know myself," said a voice, the same that had called through the key-hole, and Mary sprang back in affright, while the old woman laughed and hid her face in her capacious apron.

"Who spoke?" said Mary, looking around.

"I did," answered the same voice as before, but this time it seemed to come from the old negro woman's apron.

Mary looked astonished, and for a moment could not speak.

"Who are you?" she said, at length.

"Denver Dan!" was the answer, and the old woman straightened up, threw aside her apron and showed a face as white as that of Mary herself.

Mary looked at her own hand, saw that it was black, from contact with the old woman's.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"It means that you are my own darling, and that I have come to take you away," said the transformed negro woman.

In an instant the heavy frock, gay turban, apron and everything worn by the negress, was thrown off, and a tall, handsome young man, dressed in dark, neatly fitting clothes, stood in her place.

"Dan, my own, my dearest," cried Mary, rushing to his arms, where she was folded in a fond embrace. "You have come to rescue me?"

"I have indeed!"

"And they call you Denver Dan?"

"Yes; but don't say a word about it. No one knows who I am, and the time is not ripe for a disclosure yet."

"What have you done with your beautiful mustache?"

"Oh, I had to shave that off, because old negro women don't wear yellow mustaches. I've got another one in my pocket, though!"

"Got another one in your pocket?"

"Certainly;" and the young man turned around quickly, hiding his face from view. When he faced about again, he wore a beautiful, tawny mustache, and had a half mask of black silk over his face.

"Behold Denver Dan!" he said. "And now for escape."

Drawing a slouched hat from some part of the old woman's dress, he put it upon his head, and drawing a revolver from his pocket, said, in a voice full of determination:

"Now to get out of here, and woe to any man who dares cross the path of Denver Dan!"

"You will not resume your disguise?"

"No; Denver Dan is feared more than an old negress can be, or than plain Daniel Fleming."

"But if you meet Phil Dorn?"

"I want to meet him! I would like nothing better. Come, let us be away. Follow close behind me, and fear nothing."

"With you at my side, dear Dan, I shall know no fear."

Dan threw open the door and went boldly down stairs, meeting with no resistance, and seeing no one until he had reached the last landing.

Then someone rushed in hastily and started to come up stairs.

He threw the light of a dark lantern he carried full in the face of the fugitives, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Denver Dan, as I live!" he gasped.

"Ay! and more than Denver Dan!" said that worthy, removing his mask.

"Daniel Fleming!" uttered Phil Dorn, for he, indeed, it was, drawing his revolver.

Dan's weapon was already in his hand, and he dashed upon Phil so suddenly that the rascal had no time to use his revolver.

"At last, Phil Dorn, we meet face to face!" said Dan, clutching his enemy by the throat. "'Tis you who have aspersed my good name, robbed your benefactors and thrown the blame upon me, caused me to beggar myself to make good the losses you have caused, traduced me on every hand, brought disgrace on my fair name, and made me an outcast. I have searched long and well for you, and at last we meet face to face!"

"Mercy—mercy!" gasped Phil Dorn, almost choking, Dan's grasp being anything but a tender one. "Release

me, and I will recant everything, restore everything, and make you independent for life, only spare me, only let me live!"

"Wretch! I do not seek your base life! I seek only justice!" said Dan, striking the cowardly ruffian's weapon from his grasp, and pushing him down the steps, and through the hallway to the door.

"Help—help—help!" screamed Phil, who had a deadly horror of a court of justice, where he knew Dan meant to drag him.

"Utter another word, and you're a dead man!" said Dan, opening the door and pushing Phil out, quickly followed by Mary Travis.

The alarm had been given, and footsteps were heard approaching, and gruff voices shouting.

The place bore a bad reputation, being one of the most notorious gambling houses in the whole city, and Dan well knew that he would be shot upon sight, once the ruffians who kept the place caught up with him.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CLOUD LIFTED—CONCLUSION.

DAN had succeeded by *finesse* in spiriting away the negress who attended to Mary's wants, and had disguised himself so well as to escape detection; but now in his own guise, it would go hard with him if captured.

He bounced through the door, and seizing Phil more firmly by the collar, knocked him off his feet and dragged him thus through the street as fast as he could run, keeping hold of Mary with one hand, and never giving the ruffian a chance to regain his footing until he reached the office of the chief of police, for Denver was graced with such a dignitary at that time, although he was not much more than an ornament.

"This fellow deserves lynching, if ever a man did in his life," said Dan, "but I've got a better use for him than that."

"What is it?"

"He robbed a bank in the east, where both he and I were employed, and not satisfied with that, made it seem as if I had done it, and then tried his best to ruin me. I made up the loss, though it took my last cent, and more besides, but a blot was upon my name, and I was obliged to leave the state."

"This viper has steadily continued his defamatory of my character," continued Dan, "and has caused the vilest reports concerning me to be circulated. Not content with robbing me of my good name, he has tried to steal the love of a noble girl from me and thus complete my misery; but I have foiled him, and justice shall at last be meted out to us both."

"He deserves to be yanked up to the nearest tree, and if the boys get hold of him they'll do it."

"That will not do. I mean to take him back and vindicate my honor. I have swift horses, and shall relay every fifty miles; and when I reach the railroad, can travel faster."

"Well, good-luck go with you."

* * * * *

"Oh, Mary!—have you heard the news?"

It was Jack Travis who put this question to his sister, one pleasant night about a month after the incident just narrated, as Mary was sitting by the fire, Jack having just entered.

"No. What is it?"

"Denver Dan has been thoroughly vindicated and his good name restored."

"Thank Heaven for that!"

"Phil Dorn has been sent to prison for ten years, and Dan has got his money back. What we won from Charley

in that place in Denver has been divided among all the poor families in the neighborhood."

"That's good. When is Dan coming back to Colorado?"

"When is he coming back?"

"Yes."

"He is not coming back at all."

"Not coming at all?"

"No, indeed!"

"Is he going to stay in the East?"

"No."

"Then he must be going to return?"

"No."

"I don't see why."

"I do," said Jack, laughing.

"Explain yourself."

"He is not coming back, because—"

"Because what?"

"He is already back here."

"Is he?"

"Yes, indeed he is," said the well-remembered voice of Denver Dan, and at the next moment he sprang into the

room and clasped Mary in a fond embrace, while Jack whistled a tune and pretended to look the other way, which he did not do at all, the young rogue.

* * * * *

Ned Travis built a new house nearer the center of population and started a store, stocked with goods brought by Dan, and it was rumored, not long afterward, that he had taken Dan into partnership, and that Dan, in turn, was thinking of taking a partner himself, the same being none other than pretty Mary Travis, the belle of the Rocky Mountains.

With the extinction of Colorado Charley's gang, Dan's mission was not ended, by any means, as there were still many lawless bands to be gotten rid of, and many were the fierce struggles that took place between the better element, represented by our hero, and the lower stratum, of which such men as Colorado Charley and his pals were fair samples.

With these scenes we have not space nor time to mingle in these pages, and so, for the present, at least, let us say good-by to our firm friend, DENVER DAN.

[THE END.]

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